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TV views

Portrait of a Senator

by Ben Levine

"PORTRAIT of a Senator as a Man," might well have been the title of the CBS News Special in which Sen. J. W. Fulbright, discarding his mantle as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, bared the soul of a troubled statesman to Eric Sevareid, Martin Agronsky and the TV audience.

"I played a part that I'm not at all proud of," said Fulbright, confessing it was wrong of him not to have precipitated a full Senate debate when President Johnson dropped his first bomb on North Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

But it is even now not too late to speak the truth, he said, though Rusk and Johnson consider it more important to honor a "commitment" and "save face."

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WHAT IS this commitment? he asked; it is a "self-generating" commitment, with a government the U.S. itself created, a "commitment by reiteration."

And was it becoming of a big and powerful nation like the U.S. to worry about saving face? Only a small and weak nation, he noted, might possibly concern itself with this question of prestige.

Did the Soviet Union, he said, say, "Our prestige is involved," when it withdrew its missiles from Cuba?

Surely, he added, we would gain in stature, not lose face, if we retreated from our impossible position in Vietnam.

And one might interpose to point out how strange it is for the U.S. to be the one nation to take up what was once said to be an Oriental concern about face-saving.

Actually it is Johnson's face we are being asked to save, and is this the face for which to launch a thousand bombs?

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FULBRIGHT did not hold with Rusk's "confrontation theory" that wars of national liberation can or must be crushed.

Also he disposed of the "Munich" argument.

There was, he said in response to a question from Sevareid, no analogy between Hitler and any Chinese threat. Hitler had a powerful aggressive military aggressive machine, whereas China's strength, he said, is still purely defensive.

Chinese intransigence, he commented, is based on grievances of more than 100 years. He cited that "disgraceful war" in the 1840's when the western nations

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imposed the opium trade on the Celestial Empire.

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WE ARE STILL MISLED, he said, by preoccupation with "international Communism."

Briefings by Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor misled his committee at times, though he thought they were inaccurate

rather than mendacious. The journalists, he said, proved to be more accurate than the government about Vietnam and the Dominican Republic.

And we recall reading that Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense, wrote to Fred W. Friendly, president of CBS News, protesting a scene in a CBS report Aug. 6 by Moreh Safer of U.S. Marines burning Vietnam village at Cam Ne.

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AS TO negotiations, Fulbright was also forthright. We must deal, he insisted, with the Vietcong, for theirs is the army in the field, and what use is an agreement to which the Vietcong doesn't subscribe? Nor was he sure that Hanoi is in such control of the South Vietnam Liberation soldiers as Rusk claims.

If Hanoi won't accept UN intervention, he said, if we really want peace, we can, instead of the sterile and false repetition that Hanoi has no offer, accept the proposal to reconvene the Geneva conference.

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THUS FULL and bright spoke Fulbright. The question that emerged was a simple one: What will it profit us to save Johnson's face and lose the world?